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ABSTRACT

The Christmas season in Mexico starts on December 16 with "las posadas," a series of religious processions in which families or neighbors reenact Joseph's search for shelter for Mary en route to Bethlehem. Those representing pilgrims travel from home to home until they are finally accepted by those representing innkeepers at a home with a "nacimiento" (nativity scene). There the pilgrims place figures representing Mary and Joseph. On Christmas Eve, the Christ Child is laid in the manger. Then children break a "pinata," a decorated, candy-filled earthen or papier mache container, to complete "las posadas." The Mexican Christmas tradition incorporates legends surrounding poinsettias, roosters, and decorative displays using much light, including fireworks and "farolitos" (candles inside paperbags). Customs include exchanging gifts, eating grapes for good luck, and singing Spanish Christmas songs. January 6 is the "Dia de los Reyes," (Day of the Kings) celebrating the arrival of the three "Wise Men." Gifts are again exchanged, and a "rosca" (special cake) is baked with a tiny porcelain doll inside. Whoever is served the piece with the doll must give a party on February 2, the date the Christ Child is removed from the "nacimiento." The words to a traditional Mexican carol are attached. (MM)

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KERN COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

MIGRANT EDUCATION PROGRAM

CHRISTMAS IN MEXICO

September, 1981

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CHRISTMAS IN MEXICO

Christmas in Mexico is a truly festive occasion; you can find there many of the things that we associate with Christmas, such as the Christmas tree and Santa Claus, and presents for boys and girls who have been very good, and also for some who have perhaps transgressed just now and then. But it is the things that have not drifted south of the border from the United States that makes Christmas in Mexico so doubly delightful.

The Christmas season in Mexico starts on the 16th day of December and extends to the 6th of January (and then some).

The Posadas are a series of religious processions in which Joseph's fruitless search for shelter for Mary en route to Bethlehem is reenacted. (This was originally an episode in an old Spanish Christmas play, Los Pastores, written around the incidents relating to the birth of Christ.) The word posada means "inn" or "place of lodging." Las posadas begin nine days before Christmas, commemorating the time it took Mary and Joseph to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It may be enacted by nine neighborhood families who meet at a different house each night, making of the occasion a rather elaborate ceremonial and social affair, or it may be carried out by just one family at home as part of the traditional Christmas ritual. Some families, too, observe the occasion on a single evening. The only real requirement is that the participants be divided into two groups, the pilgrims and the innkeepers. Traditionally the head of the household starts the festivities for the evening by leading the rosary. After this, family, friends, and guests representing the pilgrims form a procession and march around the house carrying lighted candles. Usually two children take the lead, carrying figures of Joseph and Mary. Each innkeeper takes his place in one of the rooms. Moving from room to room (or from house to house, in the case of a neighborhood enactment) the pilgrims ask for

lodging*, only to be refused. At last the pilgrims reach a room (or house) where an altar has been previously set up, and having been identified as Joseph and Mary, they are allowed to enter. The altar is a Nativity scene or Nacimiento, decorated with mosses, greens, and flowers in a hillside setting with miniature houses, sheep, shepherds, trees, and other landscape features. The figures of Mary and Joseph are placed in the stable and the procedure is repeated each night until Christmas Eve, when the Christ Child is laid in the manger.

With the ceremonial completed, refreshments are served and then come the piñata. The piñata, made in various shapes around an earthenware pot or more recently of papier mâchè, is a custom brought from Spain centuries ago. The piñata is often suspended from the branch of a tree, but may also be hung from a ceiling or from a rope stretched between buildings on a narrow street. More than a few whacks administered by blindfolded children are the rule before the piñata cracks and the goodies fall out--little toys, candy, fruits.

*En Nombre del Cielo, a version of the Litany of Loretto set to music, is attached.

The poinsettia which is native to Mexico blooms there at Christmas time. In Spanish it is called "Flor de Nochebuena" or "Christmas Eve Flower", and there is a legend that tells of its miraculous origin. A little Mexican boy named Pablo, eager to visit the manger in the village church, was upset because he had no suitable gift to offer. Rather than go empty handed Pablo picked some green branches from a bush that grew along the dusty road and took them to the church. The other children made fun of him, but when they looked a second time a brilliant star-shaped flower topped each branch. (The flower is really a tiny yellow one in the center of the red leaves, but the legend is none the less delightful.)

The poinsettia was brought to the United States by an ambassador of the United States to Mexico whose name was Joel R. Poinsett. He brought cuttings to his southern mansion where the climate was warm. The poinsettia grows well in California, but will freeze in the cold winters of Kern County unless it is given shelter and warmth during freezing weather.

At 12:00 on Christmas Eve there is the Misa del Gallo or Rooster's Mass, which is a very popular part of the total Christmas season. Tradition has it that the roosters in Bethlehem were the first to announce the birth of Jesus, and so it is fitting that the annual celebration of his birth be given the name Misa del Gallo.

The Christmas season in Mexico now includes some customs that have drifted across the border from the United States, including Christmas trees and Santa Claus. Children get gifts from Santa Claus on Christmas Day, and adults also may exchange gifts on this day. They may be opened under a Christmas tree decorated much as you would expect to see one in this country.

Christmas in Mexico means lights--lights of all kinds. Cities such as Guadalajara and Mexico City will have many blocks of downtown streets with beautiful street decorations hung from lamppost to lamppost. These decorations are not used over and over until they become unsightly; they are designed anew for each season. You can see poinsettias, candles, wreaths, angels, choirboys, and many other signs of the season done in lights.

A traffic circle is a good place to find a large nativity scene or some other appropriate display--often larger than life size; this is especially true in Mexico City.

Some of the barrios ("neighborhoods") of the larger cities will do a certain thing year after year, or perhaps something spectacular and different each Christmas. One such barrio is the Barrio Industrial in Mexico City, where each holiday season finds lights draped across the streets from balcony to balcony, with streamers of moss hanging from the strings of lights--a unique and beautiful sight.

The piñata is found everywhere, including at the posadas parties, and they may be purchased a mercados (markets) or puestos (stalls). The traditional piñata for the Christmas season is star-shaped, but they may be found in just about any shape you can imagine; a few years ago a Batman piñata was quite popular. Cartoon and television characters have some influence on piñata design. Little excuse is needed to have a piñata party; little difficulty is encountered in finding willing participants to flail away and dive for the goodies.

There is an interesting custom that goes with New Year's Eve, a custom brought from Spain. At the stroke of midnight those who observe this custom eat one grape with each stroke of the clock striking the hour--one grape for each hour, one grape for each month of the new year. The grape was far more important in Spain than it has been in Mexico; the source of wine in Spain, the grape was the symbol of an anticipated good harvest, a bountiful year. The twelve grapes were thus a somewhat pagan "prayer" for a good succeeding year.

Fireworks in Mexico are another delight at Christmas time. In the United States we associate fireworks principally with the Fourth of July. In Mexico they have similar fireworks displays, but at Christmas time. Firecrackers are used as well, but mostly aerial displays and rockets. Unfortunately children must pay a price for this type of celebration--a price in injuries due to inexperience. The public displays are much safer.

A custom that came from Mexico (in turn from China) to New Mexico is the farolitos ("little lanterns"). These are a tradition in particular in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Small paper bags with a little sand in them to hold them in place have a candle inside; the result is a soft light that is pleasing to the eye. They may be used to line one's driveway, or in other ways.

A rather safe farolito may be made by using a bag about the size of a lunch bag and the small votive candles in the glass bases. Many schools would not permit these as a matter of precaution against fire. A truly safe substitute for the candle may be made by using a flashlight battery with a wire soldered to the base, a small bulb soldered to the top; the wire wraps around the other part of the bulb to make or break the connection. This same safe substitute for the candle may be used by children who are taking part in posadas.

January 6 is the Día de los Reyes ("Day of the Kings") which used to be the day when little children got their gifts--still the case in Spain. Now little children have a bonus, because they have now Santa Claus and presents on Christmas Day, as well as presents from the Kings (the three Wise Men) on January 6; really, it's a double Christmas--that's pretty hard to beat.

Another custom that goes along with the Día de los Reyes is the rosca (a ring-shaped coffee cake), which is served traditionally with hot chocolate. The thing that is special about the rosca is that a tiny porcelain doll is baked somewhere in the pastry. Everybody knows it's there, but where? Whoever gets the little doll in his portion of rosca must give a party for all those present several weeks later.

Christmas music in Mexico is a combination of modern and traditional. In general, you will not hear carols customarily heard in the United States that are English in origin. Those that are international or Latin in origin

(e.g. "Silent Night", "Adeste Fidelis") will be heard. In addition there will be heard songs that are typically Spanish or Mexican in origin.

The nacimiento ("nativity scene") is an important part of the celebration of Christmas in the Mexican home. The nacimiento may be very humble in its furnishings or quite ornate--the intent and thought, however, are identical. Many families add to their nacimiento each year, adding animals, angels, new figures of Christ, Joseph, Mary, the Wise Men--whatever is needed to make their nacimiento a little more to their liking. The nacimiento in some families becomes an important part of the family's estate and is passed on to another generation.

All in all it is a delightful time of year to be in Mexico, where the Christmas holiday season sort of stretches from the 16th of December to the first week in February. Remember? The posadas start on December 16 and the party for those who consumed the rosca takes place on February 2 (Candlemas, or Día de la Candelaria). On this same day the sacred doll representing the Christ Child will be removed from the nacimiento where it was placed on Christmas Eve.

LAS POSADAS

En Nombre del Cielo

PRAY GIVE US LODGING

Traditional Mexican Carol

Allegretto
mf
E♭
E♭
B♭7
1. San José: En nom - bre del cie - - - lo,
1. Joseph. Pray give us lodg - ing dear, sir, in the name of Heav'n!
mf
B♭7
B♭
E♭
E♭
Os - pi - do po - sa - - - da
All day since morn - ing to tra - vel we've giv'n,
E♭7
E♭7
A♭
A♭
Pu - es no pue - de an - dar
Ma - ry, my wife, is ex - pec - ting a child;

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2. *Huésped:* *Aquí no es mesón*
Sigan adelante
Yo no puedo abrir
No sea algún tunante.

2. Host: You cannot stop here, I won't
make my house an inn;
I do not trust you, your story is
thin.
You two might rob me and then
run away—
Find somewhere else you can stay.
Go away! go away!

3. *San José:* *No seas inhumano;*
Tennos caridad.
Que el Dios de los cielos
Te lo premiará

3. Joseph: Please show us pity! Your heart
cannot be this hard!
Look at poor Mary, so worn and
so tired!
We are most poor, but I'll pay
what I can;
God will reward you, good man!
Let us in! let us in!

4. *Huésped:* *Ya se pueden ir*
Y no molestar.
Porque si me enfado
Los voy a apalear.

4. Host: You try my patience! I'm tired and
must get some rest;
I've told you nicely, but still you
insist.
If you don't go and stop bothering
me,
I'll fix you, I guarantee!
Go away! go away!

5. *San José:* *Mi esposa es María*
Es Reina del Cielo,
Y madre va a ser
Del Divino Verbo.

5. Joseph: Sir, I must tell you, my wife is
the Queen of Heaven,
Chosen by God to deliver his Son.
Jesus is coming to earth on this
eve;
(O Heaven, make him believe!)
Let us in! let us in!

6. *Huésped:* *¿Eres tú José?*
¿Tu esposa es María?
Entren, peregrinos,
No los conocía.

6. Host: Joseph, dear Joseph! O how could
I be so blind?
Not to know you and the Virgin so
fine!
Enter, blest pilgrims, my house is
your own;
Praise be to God on His throne!
Please come in! please come in!

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